

# 'The Exodus is not just a story, it's our history'

*The African Hebrew Israelites, a Bible-based community in Dimona with African American roots, has its own unique way of celebrating the Passover festival. Twice, in fact*

## Anglo File

Andrew Esensten

At dawn on Tuesday morning, a large group gathered on a mountain in the Negev desert to reenact the moments leading up to the Israelites' exodus from Egypt.

Dressed in robes and flowing dresses, these pilgrims prayed, sang spirituals and discarded the leftovers from their seder meals into the flames of a massive bonfire, in a scene that evoked comparisons to the film "The Ten Commandments."

"It's one thing to see Charlton Heston in a movie," said Ahbir Ben Israel, who stoked the fire with kerosene. "But we know that the Exodus is not just a story, it's our history."

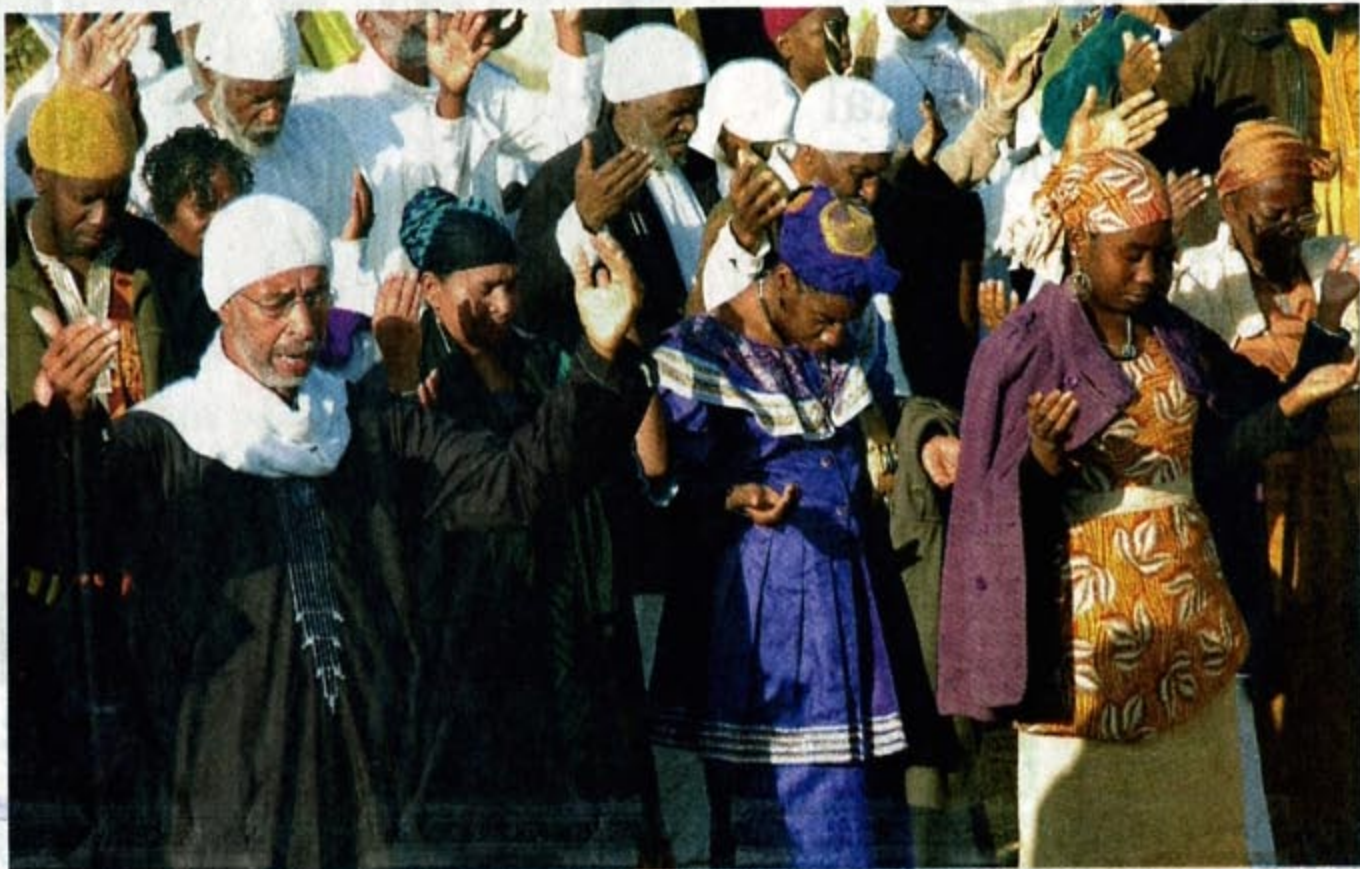
The burning of excess food from the seder meal is just one of the ways that the African Hebrew Israelites, also known as the Black Hebrews, try to "take that ancient reality and make it contemporary," Ben Israel said. They also remain in their houses from midnight until daybreak – when the Angel of Death is believed to have passed over the Israelites' houses – and, according to God's instructions, sleep in their clothing in order to be able to flee at any moment.

"It reflects how serious we are about getting closer and closer to the Creator," he said.

For a time, the Hebrews even slaughtered a lamb and smeared its blood on their doorposts, just as the Israelites did, so that their first-born sons would be spared from death. They discontinued the practice after arriving in Israel in 1969 and adopting a vegan diet.

As African Americans who identify with the tribe of Judah, and whose ancestors, they believe, endured two periods of enslavement – one in Egypt and one in the United States – the Passover tale has special resonance for the Hebrews.

"Historically, we're always



Community members praying on a mountaintop in Dimona on Tuesday.

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inspired by the story of the people being led out of Egypt, and the many trials and tribulations that were experienced on that journey," said Prince Immanuel Ben Yehuda, a community spokesman. "We always felt like we were living it."

He said he personally looks forward to the burning ceremony on the mountain because it allows him "to get rid of some of those characteristics, like doubt and fear, that you don't want to carry into the next year."

During this week of Passover, which they call the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Hebrews eat tortilla-like homemade matza and "fast" from Western music and movies.

The Hebrews actually celebrate two Passovers: They commemorate their exodus from the United States, which they view as a modern-day Babylon, every May during a two-day festival known as New World Passover.

Their literal interpretation of the Torah extends beyond

their observance of Passover to nearly every facet of their culture.

For example, they cite Genesis 1:29 as the reason for adopting a vegan diet: "And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat." They point to Methuselah, who according to the same book of the Bible lived to the ripe old age of 969, as inspiration in their quest to achieve immortality.

Earlier this month, they celebrated Rosh Hashanah based on their interpretation of a verse in Exodus that identifies the first day of the Hebrew month of Nisan (called Aviv in the Torah) as the "beginning of months," not Tishrei, which is when most Jews mark the new year. (Like Karaite Jews, the Hebrews reject the Oral Law – the Mishna and the Talmud.)

Karaliah Eshet Prince Gavriel Ha'Gadol left Chica-

go in 1967 with the founding members of the community, which now numbers about 2,500. She spent two and a half years in the jungles of Liberia before moving to Israel and said her favorite part of celebrating Passover is being with her family in a land where she feels "free to worship Yah" – the preferred Hebrew term for God in the community – "with nobody dictating to you how and when to do so."

For Elkannon Ben Shaleakh, who was also part of the vanguard group, the significance of Passover is the opportunity it provides "to start over again."

The walls of the bungalow he shares with his wife and several other families in the community's compound in Dimona, called the Village of Peace, are decorated with photos of civil rights leaders, including Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as several portraits of Ben Ammi Ben Israel, the spiritual leader of the community, whom he called "a Moses-type figure."

At his seder on Monday evening, there was no gefilte fish, brisket or matza ball soup. Instead, Ben Shaleakh and his family feasted on eggplant parmesan (with soy cheese), stuffing with gravy, kale greens, salad and soy ice cream for dessert.

He explained that the bitter herb that is traditionally eaten during the Passover seder represents "the 400 years of slavery and poverty in America." The sweet charoset, meanwhile, represents the Hebrews' joy of living as a free people in their homeland.

While his journey has not been easy – one of his children died in Liberia after falling into a well, and another son, Aharon, was killed by a Palestinian gunman while performing at a bat mitzvah in Hadera in 2002 – he said he and the rest of the Hebrews have sustained themselves through their adherence to the Bible.

"We were caught up in the Book, and we were trying to live it out," Ben Yehuda said. "We're still doing that."